

## **Focusing: Ways to Feel and Be Seen Through the Body's Perspective**

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Trauma often lives in the body from an experience that uprooted our evolution, robbing us of emotional growth and stunting the necessary reflection needed to figure out who we are on an instinctual level. To unlock the confines of a childhood far from rose-colored, or a life seemingly tarnished by psychological struggles, we must explore the implicit task of giving ourselves permission to be who and what we want to be, to live out our dreams by tapping into our deepest desires. We do this by giving ourselves power to let go of our ancestral hauntings, of our parent's un-lived lives and their complexes, unintentionally or sometimes intentionally put upon us (Hollis, 2015).

Once you've made this freedom the meaning of your life, there are spiritual practices [such as yoga, body movement, meditation, working with creativity, dream work, and focusing] that can help... These practices are what you do with your time in order to free yourself from yourself (Singer, 2013, p. 34).

These practices are how we learn better coping mechanisms to maintain our wellbeing and drink in the nectar of life. Psychologists and scholars Dodge et al. (2012), define stable wellbeing as, "when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge" (p. 230). Engaging somatic techniques like focusing can help us continue the necessary exploration that was interrupted for many of us at a young age. In this paper, I will argue how the process of focusing develops the

self by giving people visceral ways to feel and be seen from the body's perspective. I will touch on the history of Somatic and Transpersonal Psychology, and address the six essential steps of focusing, as well as how focusing can be used within the arts, to relieve stress, and finally, to heal trauma.

## **A Brief Look at Transpersonal and Somatic Psychology**

### **Transpersonal Psychology**

Transpersonal Psychology is the study of how spirit, consciousness, and matter intersect, weaving an expansive and sacred psychological container of existence. From its inception, transpersonal psychology grew from and built upon the "Third Force" of Humanistic Psychology's consideration of "love, empathy, creativity, intuition, mystical experience, altruism, and compassion," (Daniels, 2013, p. 27) by honoring and investigating a relationship with spirit. Spiritual practices such as meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and focusing, among many others, allow us to explore the channels of communication with the higher Self. As Jorge Ferrer (2008), a Spanish psychologist best known for his work in participatory spirituality states, "In the same way that pain 'contracts' the body, pleasure 'relaxes' it, making it more porous to the presence and flow of both immanent and transcendent spiritual energies" (p. 6). This parallels the process of focusing in how the tension of opposites are held.

Psychologist and lecturer Michael Daniels (2013) emphasizes that transpersonal psychology "is an applied science rather than a pure science," (p. 24) both in its understanding of transformation but also in its realization, becoming aware and awakened to new ways of knowing. We can thus measure its effects by studying both implicit and explicit experiences through engaging in inner work (Lowry, 2021), defined by American psychotherapist John

Welwood (1984) as, “the process of growing beyond limited views of self toward a greater vision and realization of what it is to be human” (p. 63).

### **Somatic Psychology**

Somatic psychology falls under the umbrella of transpersonal psychology. “It articulates emotions and sensations in the body, each as separate experiences, prior to integration” (Tantia, 2014, p. 212). Welwood (1984) points out we are ergonomically designed for vulnerability, with our hearts and bellies upright and exposed, unlike many other species whose underside is protected by, say, the hard shell of a turtle or the quills of a porcupine. If we look at the body’s design in this way, we can see the advantage walking on four legs has over two to protect the underbelly and internal organs. It is a choice an animal makes to share its soft side. In contrast, humans lead with our hearts wide open to the world and it is why we can be compelled to develop character armor, also known as ego armor to protect our *feeling centered* vulnerability (Welwood, 1984).

Over time many techniques and processes began to emerge out of somatic psychology, like the technique and theory of focusing pioneered by Eugene Gendlin in 1978. Focusing “is a process in which [one] make[s] contact with a special kind of internal bodily awareness” (Gendlin, 1978, p. 10). Gendlin calls this awareness a *felt sense*. Within this process, one can ease the tension of the body, softening the armor or the metaphorical chrysalis by acknowledging and allowing both the body’s intelligence and the psyche’s needs.

This idea of body armor can be traced back to Wilhelm Reich, considered to be the founder of Body (somatic) Psychotherapy. “Reich emphasized the importance of the body. Instead of working with ‘psychic energy’ as advocated by Freud, he developed a theory of ‘blocked muscular energy’” (Totton, 2002, as cited in Feldman, 2016, p. 104), he described as a

kind of body armor for repressed desires and needs (Eiden, 2002 as cited in Feldman). Reich's body-centered work was adopted by Humanistic Psychology in the late 1960s and 1970s (Staunton, 2002). Depth psychologist Dr. Bonnie Bright (personal communication, January 27, 2021) explains, the term *body armor* can be seen as an expression for our coping mechanisms, used to help us be and feel seen or safe. Coping mechanisms arise out of a need to escape something in our lives we cannot digest. Sometimes coping mechanisms are unhealthy and are often the lesser of two evils. For example, having an eating disorder versus thoughts of committing suicide. Obviously, the preferred choice would be the eating disorder even though that, in and of itself, is damaging to one's life. The research has shown working with somatic techniques like focusing can help us absolve negative coping mechanisms, opting for healthier choices as a way to integrate our struggles.

Armor that braces us for a full stop each time we are faced with a difficult conundrum makes integration virtually impossible by design. We can see how body armor of this kind keeps us in need of a full metal jacket, something that is never going to be a part of us but is a coping mechanism we put on at a moment's notice and can become quite emotionally heavy to lug around. In contrast, if we transition to building metaphysical wings, they are part of our internal human design and flourishing evolution. If we choose to engage with the process of focusing, we have a chance to embody a different, healthier and more holistic way of living.

### **The Six Essential Steps of Focusing**

Gendlin (2000) describes focusing as a different kind of science that studies processes. A process is a natural or involuntary action that begins under certain conditions, transpires, and then has particular results. Focusing can be practiced alone or with the help of a friend or

therapist as witness. In either scenario, the focuser is controlling the process (Coffeng, 2003).

The six steps of focusing are:

1. **Clearing A Space** - First, the focuser asks, *What is getting in my way of feeling alright?* And rather than answer the question with the thinking mind, sits with this question and lets the body tell the story. Sometimes it can be helpful to imagine sitting in a peaceful setting, like on a calm beach or in a spring meadow. As the things that are preventing the focuser from feeling alright emerge, they can be placed as objects or imagined beings and gently set off to the side or at a great distance, separated from the body (Coffeng, 2003).

2. **Felt Sense** – *What is the felt sense of the greater issue present?* The focuser notices where the energy is concentrated when thinking of the felt sense. It is common to feel the source within the center of the chest area or the abdomen. This step allows the rational mind to come together with the emotions and illuminates the heart of the problem. It is advised to wait for the felt sense to form (Coffeng, 2003).

3. **Get a Handle** – The focuser asks for words or images that match the quality of the felt sense and waits for the body to speak.

4. **Resonate** – The focuser plays with image and metaphor to see what matches their internal feelings until they find one that resonates with the quality of the felt sense. If the felt sense changes, the focuser stays with the change and follows along (Gendlin, 1978).

5. **Ask** – The focuser considers how they can move beyond the heart of the issue. *What is it about this issue that makes me feel so (insert quality of the felt sense word)* (Gendlin, 1978)?

6. **Receive** – The focuser receives what comes forth. It may come in a vision, a new feeling that settles in the body, a memory, or a symbol. The focuser stays with the process until they feel a

shift. Gendlin (1978) recommends welcoming what comes forth, avoiding any judgmental voices that may pop up.

It's important to note that focusing is not spiritually bypassing psychological dynamics that need attention, rather it is separating the troubled feelings from feeling at peace so that one can hold the tension of opposites to get some space and perspective over how to deal with the challenges or issues present. It is the grounding aspect of step number one, *Clearing a Space* that lays the new foundation to allow a fresh perspective on an issue to rise up from the body. Using the body to unravel what is stuck can illuminate solutions, that internal knowing, rather than muscling through the thinking process that can often be stuck in a loop.

When experiencing a range of emotions like fear, anger, sadness, grief, loss, embarrassment, or feeling stuck or scattered, it is our relationship to these feelings that create obstacles in our life. By taking the pressure off of the emotions and letting them be, an internal shift can happen, letting off steam and diffusing the issue at hand, returning the state of being to homeostasis (Klagsbrun, 2008). From this balanced state, we can employ the body as a vehicle of transformation or a portal into a conscious realm where guidance is found through the body's creative language of image and metaphor. Through my own inner work, I have begun to utilize the process of focusing. I have noticed a felt sense can be experienced in a myriad of ways, especially through the arts.

### **How Focusing Can Be Experienced Within the Arts**

Focusing through the arts is a multi-layered approach to bringing the process of focusing and the felt sense into form. Gendlin (2000) states, "Being with a given person is an utterly different physical living process from being alone... That's what therapy is based on" (p. 259). This is a parallel found within the container of certain artistic performances, similar to the felt

sense one gets from therapy. The performance becomes a therapeutic dyad between performer (therapist) and participants (clients) and at times that dyad is reversed.

Dr. Rae Johnson, leader of somatic studies specializing in depth psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute (2014) notes,

Somatic researchers might also...consider alternative forms of data presentation, such as performance, to communicate their findings in a way that engages others on a body-to-body level...Even the hard sciences are experimenting with performance as an effective way to communicate complex ideas" (p. 89).

Not only can the concept of focusing be conveyed through performance but the performer can compound the benefits of the felt sense through embodied actions (Bacon, 2007).

In tandem, the practice of focusing can be combined with art starting with Clearing a Space and getting to that felt sense. One can draw or paint or perform what the peaceful place looks and feels like. They can include the issues that come up or not. Incorporating art into the process helps the client deepen the work and settle into the moment for a longer period of time. Bringing the vision into an external form brings unexpected insights and is the healing process found within art therapy, giving the client even more distance from their issues and allowing them to see their problems through a new lens (Rappaport, 2006). "The Focusing process helps people experience and express themselves more congruently and authentically. By carefully resonating the felt sense with the expression of symbols the person's inner self can more accurately match his or her expression" (Focusing and Spirituality, 2003, para. 3).

### **How Focusing Can Be Used to Relieve Stress**

The first of Gendlin's six steps, Clearing a Space, can be used as a stand-alone technique to reduce stress (McGuire, 1984; McDonald, 1984; Fisch, 1984, cited in Klagsbrun, 2008). By

visually separating ourselves from the feelings that prevent us from feeling alright, it gives us a breath of fresh air to be in a calmer state and is considered a stress relieving tool that can de-escalate even suicidal thoughts (Klagsbrun, 2008). Once a person can experience themselves as separate from their issues, they can gain a more positive perspective over their problems.

(Klagsbrun, 2008). I like to think of it as sneaky meditation. Once negative emotions are plucked out and set aside, taking the time to sit in the calm of what is alright within you can be the shift needed to carry on with a new perspective.

By getting a sense of what the body is internalizing we can begin to work with it, to let it show us its wisdom in relating to our problems in a different way. For example, I went through the six steps of focusing in regards to writing this paper and experiencing writer's block which was causing quite a bit of stress. When I cleared the space, the feeling of being stuck came up. I put it aside as well as several other emotions. I chose to go back and work with what “stuck” means for me. As I sat with the feeling, a vision of a large mineral pierced upward through my chest cavity and became lodged in my breastplate. I felt the discomfort. The tightness. I began to think about what minerals are, and how they form. They form from molecules and elements bonding under different conditions like “temperature, pressure and chemically changed environments” (Sciencing, 2017, para 5), and in that moment, I realized I'm not feeling stuck, I'm feeling growth. It changed my entire perspective about performing an uncomfortable task, and in the end, I was left with a sense of encouragement. “By identifying and articulating all the issues that comprise our stress load, and metaphorically placing the identified stressors at a safe distance” (Klagsbrun, 2008, p. 217), we gain a sense of control over our stress and can move beyond it. Using the body to feel through a state of unrest into a better state is a transformative embodied exercise to use with stress and to do the deeper work with trauma.

## How Focusing Can Be Used to Heal Trauma

Mary Armstrong, a psychotherapist and trauma specialist tells the story of how focusing helped her recover buried memories of sexual abuse by her father and grandfather. Had she not discovered the practice of focusing she claims she may never have righted her life, always wondering why she reacted the way she did to certain situations and questioning her lifelong battle with depression (Madison, 2014). She knew from her studies that real change does not happen unless the body changes, too. This is Gendlin's philosophy as well, and the backbone of focusing. Real change happens in the body. (Madison, 2014). That is, the felt sense of the issue shifts within the body. If we have made a decision to move forward in our mind but the body continues to say "no," it is very difficult to change our limiting patterns. We must heal from the inside-out.

The practice of focusing helped Armstrong unearth the horrors of what had happened to her, gently, over time by keeping these memories and feelings at a safe distance until she could digest and integrate them without being overwhelmed. In contrast, for some trauma survivors who experience flashbacks, step number one of Clearing a Space is a difficult task. Focusers cannot ask the question, "*what is getting in the way of feeling alright*" without reliving the trauma. Psychologist Mary McGuire found that if she amended the first step of focusing by asking the client to begin by thinking of a peaceful memory, that was enough to anchor the client before easing into the process of Clearing a Space (Coffeng, 2003). All in all, it has been documented that focusing used as a psychological tool or in conjunction with other therapeutic techniques is helpful to integrate traumatic experiences and begin to feel more comfortable in the skin we live in.

In conclusion, as discussed earlier in this essay, Wilhelm Reich described coping mechanisms as a kind of body armor to get us through life. I propose, as we integrate what has been in the shadows of our lives, of our stories, that we turn our body armor into something more transformative and flourishing like the wings of a butterfly, a hummingbird, a hawk, or even an eagle. I quite like the contrast between the armor made of impenetrable metal, built to protect us and slowly, over time through conscious acts like focusing, transforming the armor into something more soft and graceful yet strong like beating, vibratory wings that enable us to glide along with the challenges that life throws our way.

We cannot change what has happened in the past but we can change the way we manage our negative reactions to past wounds. We can self-speak from a different, more present and positive place as time moves us forward. Focusing allows us to embody our struggles and integrate the past. It is the art of allowing and having the courage to release that which continues to hurt us by unfolding our wings of unpredictability and feeling our way into a different way of seeing (Campbell & Macmahon, 1985).

As author and psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) so aptly said, the body keeps the score, but we have the choice to practice deep listening, presence, and consciousness, and begin a new relationship with ourselves (B. Bright, personal communication, January 27, 2021). By asking Gendlin's simple questions, we have a chance to unearth what is standing in our way of feeling alright and find new, healthier ways to feel and be seen.

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